A Role of Referring Website on Online Shopping Behavior

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Abstract
Despite several attempts have been made to understand online consumer behavior across from different situational settings, little is known of referring website’s functionality on purchasing behavior. The purpose of the present study is two-folds. Firstly, the study defines different behavior patterns when consumers visit an online store through a referring website versus when consumers directly enter to an online store sans a referring website. Secondly, we investigated on the types of products (i.e. high-involvement product vs. low involvement product) purchased by access manner. Total number of 3,885 online consumers was used to conduct the study based on their detailed transaction activities.

As Internet penetrates everywhere, e-commerce has become a crucial axis in understanding contemporary consumer behavior. From rudimentary stage of e-commerce, researchers have been putting strenuous efforts to determine on deciding factors of online purchasing behavior from almost all the possible angels. However, not so much attention has been paid to how online consumer behaviors are affected contingent on the manners of access to online retail store.

The manners of online shoppers are largely divided into two venues; 1) access to an online store directly and 2) access to an online store by other website namely a referring website. In this paper, we examine different purchasing behavioral patterns when consumers access to an online retail store directly versus when they access to a site through a referring website. The present study is consisted of two parts. Firstly, we attempted to identify consumer behavioral patterns depending upon the access manner (i.e. direct access vs. indirect access via referring website). Secondly, we investigated on the types of products purchased by access manner.

The concept of referring website has been existed and perceived by consumers in e-commerce but not recognized yet. In its literal meaning, the word refer denotes “to direct or send for decision” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1993). In this light, this present study defines a referring website as “a third-party website that directs consumer to an online retail store for a possible purchase decision.” However, this is not to say on a narrow meaning of referring website taking a proactive role of recommendation by using recommending agents on a specific website but to include a broader indication of meaning of guiding consumers to another website by exposure of a brand or store name. If a consumer received some type of navigational cues by e-advertising means to be directed to an online retail store, it could be viewed that a website exerted a role of “referring”.

Product information search phase has been identified as important in shopping context (Hodkinson et al. 2000; Haubl and Trifts, 2000). Janiszewski (1998) dichotomized consumer search patterns for shopping into two categories of goal-directed search and exploratory search. The characteristic of goal-directed search behavior is highlighted as having specific plans or specifications for purchase in mind. In contrast, exploratory search behavior is distinguished from goal-directed behavior in that it is undirected and stimulus-driven. Distinctive characteristics of each search type by various scholars can be recapitulated as follow; 1) Goal-directed search type consumers regard shopping as task-related work or problems to be solved. Their behavior patterns are geared to complete transaction fast, being efficient but deliberate at the same time. Simply put, utilitarian perspective is taken by this type of consumers. 2) Exploratory search type or experiential search type consumers have a tendency to immerse themselves in browsing behavior itself or navigating sites randomly without a planned purchasing goal. They are considered to be less focused on promptness of completing a shopping behavior. This type of behavior has often been linked with hedonic motives (Sherry, 1990).

Based on the dual characteristics of consumer search types mentioned in the above, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: A consumer who enters online store directly not through a referring website will display goal-directed search type behavior spending 1) less time in total duration 2) more time per page 3) high-purchase intention.

H2: A consumer who enters online store through a referring website will display exploratory search type behavior spending 1) more time in total duration 2) less time per pages 3) low-purchase intention.

Petty and Cacioppo (1981) proposed a notable framework of Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to explain persuasion process of consumers. The model postulates the cognition process is identified as two major routes: (1) Central route and (2) Peripheral route. Central route instigates consumer to elaborate on product allowing more thoughts on attributes and therefore more likely to lead altered product beliefs and brand attitude to purchase intention. In contrast, peripheral route provokes consumer to less cogitate on product with shallow thoughts and to pay attention on non-product information. Based on ELM, we assume that consumers with direct access manner would more cogitate and more likely to display purchase intention on high-involvement product. In contrast, consumers with indirect access manner are expected to be less influenced by the length of time spent at the site and less relevant of product involvement level when purchasing a product.

H3: Purchasing behavior of a consumer who enters online store directly not through a referring website will be associated with product involvement level.